

RELIGION IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: THE CRADLE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AS IT WERE

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Abstract

From the abinitio, the position of women in religion had been historically dynamic as many had reported archeological discoveries of the effigies of great religious leaders as women and goddesses. But in-between histories, there was the rhetoric of the relegation of women to the pew as pertaining to religion. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and African traditional religions have often been adjudged to be hostile to female folk with lots of literature analyzing the ceiling placed on women's socio-economic and political lives and its attendant implications. Contemporarily, the case is different as diverse religions the world over have relaxed most strict patriarchal practices to house women albeit empower them, but amidst this ample gain, there is the dearth of scholarly works to accommodate such phoenix rise vis-à-vis religion and women thus, the essence of this work. It underscores the contemporary global religions and their modus operandi in empowering women in juxtaposition with history. With the analysis of secondary data and context, the study submits among other things that many Pentecostal churches are currently led by women, the orthodox have more priestesses and female bishops, Islam has become more gender egalitarian, allowing women with certain degree of freedom (like women driving and voting in Saudi Arabia), Hinduism is friendlier to women and female traditional cum religious leaders keep emerging unlike before. Women feel/are more religiously empowered today than in recent histories owing to the advent of advocacy democracy. With the application of neoliberal theory, the study suggests a further deregulation of religion as a panacea for total women emancipation vis-à-vis their economic and political lives.

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ABSTRACT

From the abinitio, the position of women in religion had been historically dynamic as many had reported archeological discoveries of the effigies of great religious leaders as women and goddesses. But in-between histories, there was the rhetoric of the relegation of women to the pew as pertaining to religion. Islam, Christianity, Hinduism and African traditional religions have often been adjudged to be hostile to female folk with lots of literature analyzing the ceiling placed on women's socio-economic and political lives and its attendant implications. Contemporarily, the case is different as diverse religions the world over have relaxed most strict patriarchal practices to house women albeit empower them, but amidst this ample gain, there is the dearth of scholarly works to accommodate such phoenix rise vis-à-vis religion and women thus,

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KEYWORDS

Women empowerment, religion, patriarchy, gender, advocacy democracy, deregulation

Introduction

Women who seek to be equal with men lack ambition.

(Timothy Leary)

Religion from the abinitio, has been a succor to human lives, people find solace in the dictates of religion and this has been a basis for several dogmas which had guided human lives from time immemorial. The grip of religion on human fibers is so strong that Marx believed it to be “the opium of the masses”. It suffices to say that the importance of religion cannot be overemphasized as Inter Press Service (2002) defined religion as a system of faith and worship, which provides adherents with meaning and purpose in their lives. It is one of the major institutions in the society, with almost every human civilization producing a system of religious belief. Religions in all ramifications are concerned with the transcendent, the spiritual, and with aspects of life beyond the physical world, religion connects us to the mysterious and the transcendent and provides us with “answers” to that which cannot be answered.

Owing to the subjective meanings it accrues to life and individuals, religion had over the years been a most controversial phenomenon in relation to scholarly and pedestal discusses. Adherents of religious beliefs have subjective interpretations to the dictates of their practices which provides them with a subjective view and analysis of facts and figures. For instance, Bishop David Oyedepo was declared Forbes richest pastor in the world with a net worth of \$150 million (Young, 2018) but his response was unsurprising and expected. Oyedepo was quoted saying “it’s an insult for Forbes to say I’m worth ‘only’ \$150m”, insisting to worth many more with a religious-but-un-factual backup to his claim (Banjo, 2018).

There are plethoras of religions all over the world but within each organized religion, one generally finds a large number of different denominations, sects, and cults, each with their own interpretations, beliefs and practices. Apparently, the society is structured by a complex set of religious differences and both men and women occupy and negotiate a range of different positions within this complex matrix in the religious world. To this end, existing literature in the world of scholarship such as Woodhead (2013) has favored men and has most often than not dwelt on the marginalization of women through the practicality of religion but little attention has been given to the gains of religion through which women have been empowered and projected to the world especially in most recent cases.

Objectives

The study set out to:

1. X-ray the historical trajectories of traditional religions and women empowerment.
2. Critically analyze the contributive role vis-à-vis history of Christianity in the (dis)empowerment of women, and,
3. Examine the effects of Islam in relation to history on women empowerment in Africa vis-à-vis the world.

Theoretical Framework

The neoliberal theory also known as the New Right (Haralambos et al. 2008) was advanced to accommodate the free market in the capitalist economy which it recommends as the best basis for organizing a freer society and ensuring greater participation of individuals both in the economic and religious spheres. The theory as advanced by Haralambos et al. (2008) posits that market forces encourage competition, which stimulates innovation and efficiency hence, should be allowed free flow for the development of all and sundry. The New Right i.e. neoliberalism pioneers believed that the overbearing influence and intervention of the state in an economy or any part of social institutions must be avoided if individual rights are to be promoted. Advocates of this theoretical perspective believe that development, freedom and majority participation in societal affairs is anchored on the deregulation of the society. They argue that free market systems offer economic and religious freedom that lead to greater choices for each individual including women. Stambaugh (2015) believes that one of the central ideological positions of neoliberalism (which is the maximization of individual freedom) helps to undermine patriarchal and sexist norms.

Cornwall et al (2008) summarized a conference discussion on neoliberalism and women empowerment and pinpointed the complex relationship between the two. They posited that the rhetoric of empowerment creates potential for symbiosis.

Neoliberalism in its pristine form has destabilized an order context of patriarchy and has stressed greater choices for both men and women; indeed it is this 'shared pursuit of choice' that characterizes one of the points of convergence between feminism and neoliberalism. (Cornwall, A. et al. 2008. Introduction: Reclaiming Feminism: Gender and Neoliberalism. P.2)

The concept of formal or legal equality developed and advanced by Saunders (1993) to buttress his exposition on neoliberalism involves all members of the society being subject to the same law or rules hence, special rules should not be made for different genders and restrictions should not be placed on the basis of gender. To Saunders (1990), individuals are judged according to “what” they do and not according to “who” they are. To this end, the regulation of religion by the state (which is often arranged in a patriarchal manner and favored men) promoted the dominance of men in all spheres, religion inclusive. The entrance of women into the political and economic decision making stages through neoliberal activism has led to the deregulation of the church to accommodate women as well. Neoliberal theory most often dwells on the roles and dictates of state (best put otherwise) which makes its applicability in the analysis of the concept of women empowerment vis-à-vis religion timely and worthwhile.

The somewhat marginalization of women through the dictates of religion over the years has been attributed to the patriarchal nature of some societies where it exists while the recent gains of religion in the empowerment of women as showcased all over the world (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Nigeria etc.) is owed to the realization of the states in allowing individual forces and goals to be furthered which in turn furthers the interest of the society as a whole. As a theory, neoliberalism is associated with neoclassical economic policies which are aimed at decreasing government control (of religion and other spheres) and allowing individuals of all genders to thrive (Kendall, 2003). With its global dynamism, this is the backdrop of most recent women empowerment through religion albeit other spheres/institutions. Such policies are predicated on the presupposition that private property laws free individual entrepreneurship (women and men inclusive) and a consequent improvement of their well being.

Despite the evidence that religion continues to consolidate gender inequality in post industrial societies, Woodhead (2013) posited that intensifying secularization and de-religionization (as pioneered by neoliberalism) is positively correlated with growing gender equality. Although neoliberal theory is mostly economically applicable owing to its economic base, it has been found worthy to accommodate and further the course of equal rights for equal society for both genders hence its employment and applicability to the topic under study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For ages long, it has been adjudged that men have been perceived as the sole bearers and disseminators of divine messages. Patriarchal religious structures and practices have been used to socialize women to passively accept religious teachings and dogmas as served by men with every sense of subservience and submission. These andocentric and patriarchal interpretations have defined, shaped and reshaped the socio-cultural, political, economic and otherwise contexts of women in many parts of the world which often culminates in their disempowerment and second class status. Kong (2010) views religion as a negotiated reality with each individual or society defining its own understanding, tenets and applicability within the space of time and circumstance. There is therefore the need for such fluidity, pores and nuances to be located at the epicenter of any religious discuss- whether academic or pedestal.

Schnabel (2015) was of a similar opinion when he presented that the emergence and institutionalization of different religious movements with rigid beliefs and sermons however presents a fissure between the original episteme and the way they are practiced in actuality. The chronic and historical challenge is to maintain and preserve the voices of prophetic dissent and propagate the freedom (for both men and women) necessary to institute change in the contemporary world. Pertinently, women have the larger stakes in this cycle as they are the ones suppressed and oppressed by the dogmas of submission, subservience and docility of traditional religions as it were.

Researchers such as Reitz et al (2015) have shown that religion is associated with traditional gender attitudes and actions, and because beliefs can materialize in effects (Seguino, 2011), it is expected that a major chunk of non-religious people in a country will be acclimatized more with material gender equality. It is in the same vein suspected and expected that the major world religions differ in their effects from one another, but that the largest differences will be between the religious and the non-religious, rather than between particular religious groups (Charrad, 2011). There is the conscious twist of religion to monopolize power through homogenization and ritualization (Kong, 2010), therefore, any agenda for change must pluralize religious practices to capture the original thrust of the episteme which is rooted in egalitarianism. Thus spaces must be created and reserved in our sub-consciousness and social faculty to earnestly yearn for and accommodate not just a recovery of the past but also an innovation of new liberating symbols, language and imagery that challenge authorized patriarchal canons that had held sway in the practice of religion.

With the effective utilization of these spaces, women globally ought to stake their claim visibly, vehemently and powerfully for not just their rights but also for their perspectives, ministrations and interpretations to be accepted as part of the core religious canons, for without this the antique and current guardians of existing religious and social structures will not be pushed to a critical consciousness of their oppressive nature.

Similarly, Fernandes (2016) opined that men and masculinity have always been the measure and determinant of the dialogue between the holy and profane which has often culminated in the male folk monopolizing the space of worship, prescribing that offerings can be made only by men. Most importantly, there is the somewhat growing religious consensus that women are impure because of their biological menstruation cycle (Fernandes, 2016). Owing to this, women are considered defiled and thus cannot enter the holy of holies (Jewish tabernacle), forbidden from performing Puja (Hindu offering), and cannot lead the Namaz (Salat, or Islamic prayer). This has rhetorically questioned the physique and anatomy of women (UN Women, 2018). The protruding question now remains that blood- the very ingredient that keeps one alive, has it now become a fountain of impurity?

Most amazingly, cross-sectional differences in support for or against gender equality vis-à-vis religion vary even between societies at different levels and stages of development, and depend upon the magnitude of religiosity and the type of religious values expressed and promoted by such society. It was the conclusion of Inglehart and Norris (2003) that religion matters, not only for cultural attitudes but for the *opportunities* as well as constraints it places on the lives of women where it exists, these could manifest in the ratio of females to males in educational enrolment, the female adult literacy rate, the application of contraception in family life and opportunities granted women in the paid workforce and in parliamentary representation.

Despite the many forms of marginalization perpetrated through religion globally as seen above, there are

instances of women who had soared on the roughened and wrecked back of religion to the highest echelon of fame hence, this work.

DISCUSSION

Discussion shall be made in line with three different albeit main religions in Nigeria but from a global perspective which shall be done to x-ray the changing place of women in the selected religions. These three major religions are Islam; Christianity and traditional religion, an exposition of and limitation to these selected religions is owed to the time and nature of this paper.

Women and Traditional Religions

A woman is the full circle. Within her is the power to create, nurture and transform.

(Diane Mariechild)

The most fundamental, perhaps the most important influence in the life of most Africans is religion. Though there is the belief in, and worship of one supreme deity which is universal among all really primitive people, not everyone of them exudes the same form or with the same vigor, but still the high God is embedded prominently enough in all of them to make his dominant position indubitable (Awolalu, 1975). Traditional religions refer to the indigenous or autochthonous beliefs of a people occupying a particular territory. It deals with their cosmology, ritual practices, symbols, arts, society, and so on. Olupona (2014) posits that because religion is a way of life, traditional religions relate to culture and society as they affect the worldview of the people involved. Traditional religions the world over are not stagnant but highly dynamic and constantly reacting to various shifting influences as modernity and technologies advance.

Unlike the portrayal in the representation of women in several literature, women through traditional religions have arisen to the place of commanding worship from males and females alike. Though the Supreme Being often takes masculine attributions in most of the traditional beliefs, there are empirical traces of women being worshipped as supreme beings in some religions, a fit that would have been a herculean task to achieve without religion. For instance, Anti (2018) posits that:

The Supreme gods of the Ewe of Ghana are Mawu-Lisa. They are twins. Mawu, the female is represented by the moon, while Lisa the male is represented by the sun.....the red wooden statue with large *breasts* and a crescent in one hand found among the Ewe. This image of Mawu is the only known image of the Supreme Being in Africa (Anti, K.K. 2018. **Women in African Traditional Religions**).

The worship of Mawu among the Ewe people is an age-long doctrine which dictates the workability of their society hence the influence of religion. Among some people of Western, Eastern and Southern Africa (such as the Igbos of Nigeria), women control the earth fertility and they are renowned rainmakers. This earth goddess is often given feminine attributes as reproduction and bountifulness is inherent thereof. In Africa, women perform the role of a native doctor and healer among many African people and are often revered for such “divine” roles, and older women after menopause perform priestly duties among other religious duties thereof. Zimon (2006) believes that spirit find the body of women more fertile and welcoming than men for possession hence, the importance of women in spirituality and religion. Both men and women are diviners without discriminations among many African people.

The case is similar in the East as Mark (2016) posited that women had stood tall (perhaps taller) among men in Ancient China and had consciously worked their way to the position of worship and reverence by men. For instance, Xiwangmu was the known queen of the spirits and immortal gods, who were occupying the land of Xihua (West Flower). She was given the attribute of the goddess of immortality and occupied a gold-filled castle in the Kunlun Mountains. The Xiwangmu was made most popular during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) when her cult and shrines were built for her by the government. She was also seen to have combined both the natural roles (as a wife) by being married to Mugong, Lord of the Spirits and divine role as a goddess.

In the same vein, Brockway (2015) presented the case as it was (and still is) in the Roman Empire. Among the multitude of men, a woman was adorned with reverence and worship which was believed to be the goddess of love, beauty and sexuality. Venus- a female supernatural being- is one of the most famous Goddesses on earth, with a possession of her own planet - Venus, planet of poetry, music, pleasure and love. Her name is synonymous with all that is feminine, and with love and passion. The same was the case among the Greeks where women were worshipped and revered without prejudice to their gender parlance. Athena among many other smaller goddesses was among the Olympians- the great gods/goddesses of Ancient Greece who were worshipped with vim and vigor.

Yemoja, the most prominent of the river divinities among the Yoruba people for example, is not only the mother of numerous river deities, but also the ruler of the Ogun River in Abeokuta. She is also regarded as the mother of fishes and the giver of children. Women therefore pray to her for children, with yams and fowls. . . . There are other prominent river goddesses like Oya the goddess of the Niger River and Orisha Oko, an important farm goddess (**Anti, K.K. 2018. Women in African Traditional Religions**).

Pertinently, traditional religion has not discriminated between male and female as the latter command worship amidst men. Theoretically, it cannot be said that the traditional fit where women are given reverence and worship through traditional religions was brought about by the New Right i.e. neoliberalism as the origin of traditional worship and religion is owed to the inception of the society and is as old as the pristine society itself whereas, the New Right theory is a recent event which was ushered in by the age of agitation and revolution.

Although it can be inferred that the liberty allowed individuals to greatly participate in religions that protrude their self worth and enhance their personal sense of choice is owed to the agitations of neoliberals, which has invariably yielded more gains to religions- traditional religions inclusive.

Women and Christianity

In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect. . . .

(1st Timothy 3:11a. NIV)

Be subject to "one another" out of reverence for Christ

(Ephesians 5:21. RSV)

Christianity had also seen women rise to the fore even since its inception and origin. There are traces of such assertion in the Bible which recorded the germane roles played by women in the ministry of Jesus Christ (from whom Christianity originated). Owing to the effective participation of women in the ministry of Jesus Christ, the courtesy of being the *first* to see Jesus after resurrection was granted Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9. RSV). Despite such important roles of women in the emergence, sustenance and spread of Christianity, women were in-between adjudged to be marginalized as they were restricted from occupying sensitive positions in the Christendom. In the classically organized churches, women were prohibited from occupying sensitive leadership positions. Basinger (1988) espoused traces of such restrictions in the Roman Catholic and other Orthodox churches where only men were allowed to serve as priests or deacons and in other leadership positions such as pope, patriarch and bishop.

Down the line, the case is in comparison to the past relieved of such static analysis as currents and under-currents of women's roles and agitations for inclusiveness and emancipation have found a basis. Christian women are now at the forefront of administration or share the same pace as men with the emergence of Protestantism. Since 1970s, there has been the drastic shift in the doctrine of the orthodox churches such as the Roman Catholic and Anglican where women were initially relegated (Bollag, 1992). Brook (2018) presented that Ludmila Javorová, a Czech Roman Catholic woman (who worked in the underground church during the time of communist rule in Czechoslovakia and served as a vicar general for bishop Davidek) was adjudged the first ordained female priest. She is known for being one of a number of Czech women who underwent an ordination ceremony as a priest, despite the dispute generated by such action.

Since then, facts have emerged on women being ordained to occupy the highest position of a parish in the doctrine of the Roman Catholic such that in 2002, seven women were ordained Roman Catholic priests (Brook, 2018) by Bishops Ferdinand Regelsberger and Rómulo Antonio Braschi. Though seen as a radical act, these individuals championed the course of history in the empowerment of women as these seven women are believed to be among the first to be given the right to oversee a parish since after the 70s (Brook, 2018).

Contemporarily, numerous women priests and bishops have emerged and more are still expected with the advent of advocacy democracy which has led to the awakening of women to the equal (or superior) role they play in comparison to men in the society. The place of Christian religion in the empowerment of women is central as Turpin (2018) posits that;

The very first college in world history to offer a bachelor's degree to women, Oberlin, did so in 1837, with the goal of training more people (women) to spread the evangelical gospel. In other words, theologically conservative Christians pioneered women's higher education for religious reasons (**Turpin, A.L. 2018. Women's Higher Education was Pioneered by Evangelical Christian Leaders**).

Pertinently, Christian theology has not been the same since the emergence of the protestant denominations and this has most often heralded calls to shift church authority, with the aim of balancing same among men and women. Subsequently, women have ridden on the back of religion to rise to prominence in the contemporary world- a somewhat herculean shift without religion. Bimbo Odukoya, who through Fountain of Life Church became a world renowned personality with over 60 international awards and recognition until her demise. Owing to her exploit through religion, she was one of several individuals chosen by Samsung to represent Nigeria in carrying the Olympic Torch in Athens, Greece at the 2004 Olympic Games (Ranker, 2018).

In a similar manner, religion had over the years accelerated the journey of notable women to the echelon of fame and recognition albeit empowerment as through religion, Margaret Idahosa (the archbishop of Church of God Mission) became the first Nigerian woman to be ordained as archbishop in 2009 and the first female chancellor of a university in Africa-Benson Idahosa University, Benin city, Nigeria. A fit realized through the contribution of religion.

The controversy in the church has been undergirded by the gender of clergy inadvertently justified (explicitly or implicitly) by the gender of God. This theology of exclusion appears to have been justified by the ways men in authority use the Christian Bible, but such orientation is gradually finding oblivion as the above examples present an empirical evidence of the place of religion in the empowerment of women which has taken roots in the contemporary society owing to several factors chief of which is the advent of the age of inclusion (Pillay, 2017), awareness creation and state deregulation of societal institutions to include women in several positions of authority.

Theoretically, the origin of Protestantism (which is embedded in agitation) saw to the somewhat involvement of thought-radical and ideologically stimulating aspect of religion which has ensured greater participation of both genders through awakening. The emergence of New Right (Haralambos et al, 2008) introduced a more thought-provoking process geared towards the assurance of greater individual rights. People as a result of this began to realize more and more the depth of their rights and their ability to participate in societal reforms.

Women began to look beyond their age-long role as *commonhousewives* and were poised to make economic change and command relevance. Religion became the ready-made tool for such attainment hence their greater participation which has contemporarily yielded more gains as those women that attained relevance became trailblazers, role models and decision makers in the other spheres of the society as well.

Women and Islam

"Verily for all men and women who have surrendered themselves unto Allah, and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble

themselves [before Allah], and all men and women who give in charity, and all self-denying men and self-denying women, and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember Allah unceasingly: for [all of] them has Allah readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward.” (Quran 33:35).

The controversy garnered by Islamic religion on the role of women has been indisputable for years as several scholars uncritically analyze such demeaning role vis-à-vis women’s (in)equality. On the issues of gender, development and religion, Kong (2010) believes that research has developed on the ways in which gender roles are shaped by religion and the specific contexts of livelihood yet, rights traditionally, culturally, politically, economically and socially deprived of women have been advocated through religion. Whether we look at religion from the perspective of Islam or not, many scholars have believed and submitted that religion had been a patriarchal endeavor and men have solidified and consolidated their claims on power within the echelon and decision making processes in matters of religion hence, the perpetual subjugation of women.

This is not far from the truth vis-à-vis Islam when placed within the contextual discourses of primitive eras. Notwithstanding, it is not without saying that there have been recorded histories of women exerting influence through the contestations of the power of Islamic religion. Malama A’ishatu- placed in-between patriarchal indigenous tradition and French colonialism, fought for women’s and girl’s education in the circular through the Islamic – Quranic – notion of the right to knowledge for all (Raemdonck, 2015).

Historically, many women have arisen to challenge the burgeoning view that men ought to be the custodian of Islamic faith, and through such agitations, a case had been made for their equality. For instance, Wadud (2018) wrote while defaming the patriarchal grip of religious power that;

Patriarchy is a kind of shirk (i.e. the ultimate violation of divine unity) because it denies the equality of all Allah’s creation. Patriarchy rests on the Satanic notion of Istikbar (thinking of oneself as better than another). It contradicts the Qur’anic vision of the equal and reciprocal moral relationships and responsibilities of women and men, as laid out in Al-Ahzab 33:35. It also contradicts the vision of the relationship between husband and wife, as reflected in Al-Room 30:21, which talks not of domination and competition but partnership, cooperation and affection (Wadud, A. 2018. **Islam Beyond Patriarchy Through Gender Inclusive Qur’anic Analysis**)

In spite of these, there is the (un)conscious flexibility introduced therein as women are now beginning to take relatively equal prominent roles in the religion. This is so as the religion can ‘boast’ of a woman having led the much girded and guided Jumuah prayers over and again (Adina, 2017). Amina Wadud led Jumuah prayers for the first time in Capetown in 1994 (an action that presents her as the first woman to lead Muslim prayers- Jumuah (Friday) all over the world). Such incidence was repeated in United States in 2005 when she led a congregation of both men and women in the same prayer (Aljazeera, 2005). Being an African-American who became a Muslim at 20 and now a Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, and also a visiting scholar at the Starr King School for the Ministry in California, as well as visiting consultant on Islam and gender at the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism in Indonesia, she set a basis for greater women participation in the Islamic faith.

While trying to compare the gains of Islam in Africa vis-à-vis traditional African religions and how it has brought about women empowerment as against the roles women played in the traditional system, Njoh and Akiwumi (2012) presented that Islam has liberated African women in terms of marriage. They further stated that in contrast to African indigenous religion which places no limit to the number of women a man could marry, Islam limits the number of women that one man can marry to four. Therefore, for the purpose of the present discussion, Islam accorded women more rights than indigenous African culture (Njoh and Akiwumi, 2012).

It is owed to this contemporary sense of women suzerainty ushered in by Islam and the recent need to allow women greater participation that major Islamic countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh and Turkey can boast of having women as their presidents, prime ministers or heads of governments at some point. To this end, the center of Islamic religion i.e. Saudi Arabia have begun the deregulation of women participation in

public spheres by allowing women the liberty to drive, vote and participate in other public affairs.

Theoretically, there is the irony of facts as women have been allowed more liberty in adjudged Muslim countries to participate in public cum political affairs than western countries (Mazrui, 2004). Therefore, it is misleading to associate Islamic doctrines such as the aforementioned with discrimination against women. This is so as women in Islamic countries in juxtaposition with countries of other religions, have risen to hold notable positions such as former prime minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto (served 1988-1990 and 1993-1996), Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri (became president 2001).

Worthy of note also are the former Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller (served 1993-1995), former Senegalese Prime Minister Mame Madior Boye (appointed 2001), Bangladeshi Prime Ministers Begum Khaleda Zia (served 1991–96 and 2001–06) and Sheikh Hasina Wajed (served 1996-01, 2009–present), former Iranian Vice President Masoumeh Ebtekar (served 1997–2005), Malian president Cissé Mariam Kaïdama Sidibé (elected in 2011), Kosovan President Atifete Jahjaga (served 2011–16), current President of Mauritius Bibi Ameenah Firdaus Gurib-Fakim (elected in 2015) and Current President of Singapore Halimah Yacob (elected in 2017).

All these women arose to power through conscious or unconscious inclusiveness of females in the societal processes which was ushered in by the age of neoliberalism.

CONCLUSION

Women have been adjudged to be weaker, but I shall emphatically present in borrowed terms that women and their place in religion and other spheres had been grossly misconstrued, misrepresented and misinterpreted. The power of women and their ability to efficaciously exert it in developmental strands is well captured in the phrase “though men rule the world but women rule the men that rule the world, therefore, women rule the world”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the recent gains made by religion in relation to women empowerment, it is recommended by this work that among other things;

1. The dogmas of religion (whether Islam, Christianity or African traditional religions) should be made more egalitarian and women-accommodating so as to allow women more freedom in the religious sphere which would in turn help them rise in other spheres.
2. Women should wake up to the clarion call of constructive agitations for an inclusive society as power is not given but taken therefore, the women folk ought to stake their claims albeit constructively as partners in religious and other affairs and not subordinates.
3. Men should be reoriented to be more accommodating, egalitarian and less patriarchal so as to be willing to accommodate the entrants of women in spheres controlled by them.
4. There should be a conscious deregulation of religion and less state controlled.

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